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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a description of the use of surface design in India and how those patterns have migrated throughout India. This study is confined in interest to the use of design and pattern to convey religious symbolism and other auspicious meanings. The migration of pattern to various parts of India will change the name or the technique, but it does not change the pattern significantly. Examples are presented of a few of the designs, their names, the place of origin and the motifs. A discussion of the symbolism of the motifs concludes the paper. (EH)

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In Search of Lakshmi's Footprints

A brief study of the use of surface design in India

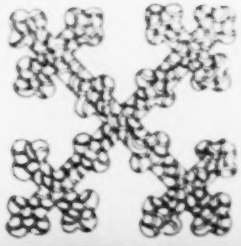
by

Marie Rasmussen
Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar 1997
Continuity and Change: India in the 21st Century

The use of surface design to enhance textiles, to ornament structures, to decorate the dieties, and in all manner of body adornment including Mehandi (tattooing) and jewelry are part of the Indian tradition. This study is confined in interest to the use of design and pattern to convey religious symbolism and other auspicious meanings. The migration of pattern to various parts of India will change the name or the technique, but it does not change the pattern significantly.

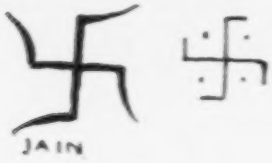
Patterns are painted on walls and floors using a variety of materials. These include rice paste mixed with vegetable dyes or minerals for color; rice paste mixed with chalk or lime for white; and finally colored materials from a variety of sources can form the completed design. These colored materials include flower petals, ground minerals, dyed rice, seeds in various colors and leaves. The designs after completion are not intended to be permanent and therefore are created from impermanent materials. At the conclusion of the worship (puja) or festival the design is destroyed or replaced by a more current design. Wall designs feature secular themes. Floor designs are connected with religious observances. The religious festivals include honoring: Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati, Kama, Devi, Ganesha, Rama, Gayatri, Lakshmi and so on. Other designs are created for festivals appropriate to incidents in mythology, phases of the moon,eclipses, solstices, equinoxes, and the stars, in addition to snakes, cows, rivers, hills, plants, coconuts, ancestors and spirits. Hindu worship takes place either through veneration of figurative art (sculpture); or through two-dimensional art (yantra) meaning specific geometrical designs; or through no form at all. The geometrical shapes include circles, squares, triangles, straight and curved lines in various configurations.

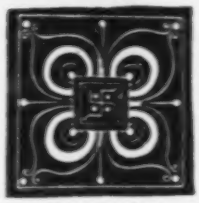
The patterns are called different names depending on the Indian state of origin and the usage. The following are but a few of the patterns and their origin:

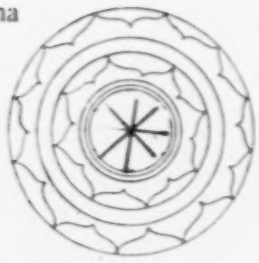
Design name	Origin	Motif
Mandana	Rajastan,Bengal,Bihar	Pagalya (footprints)
	Rajastan	Bijani,Bara,Bavari (seasonal)
	Madhya Pradesh	Ekadashi and Devuthan
		

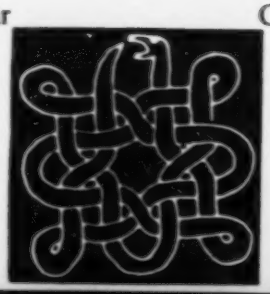
page two: Indian design

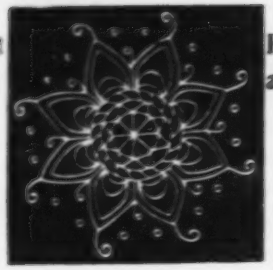
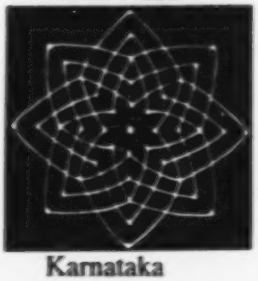
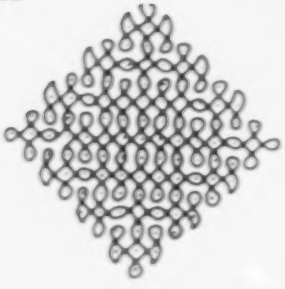
Design name	Origin	Motif
Rangolis	Maharastra	Social and religious
Swastika	Maharastra Tamil Nadu Andhra Pradesh	Points of compass Duality of all spirit/matter Suggesting clockwise rotation of the earth
Chowk	Himachal Pradesh	variation on a swastika
Aripana	Bihar	Stars; Lotus; variations on nine
Alpana	West Bengal Orissa	Lotus called sanzi in Uttar Pradesh
Pakhambha	Manipur	Coiled/entwined snake









Design name	Origin	Motif
Santhias	Gujarat 	Home decor during Diwali and Holi decorations
Shrivatsa	Mark on the breast of Vishnu, later Buddhist	Longevity, used at weddings
Kolam	Tamil Nadu 	Geometric shapes that are connected with dots
Muggulu 	Karnataka Kerala Andhra Pradesh	Symbolize gods, goddesses, festivals, recognition of a great variety of sensory and artistic charms
Mandala	India, China, Indonesia Japan, Tibet	Sanskrit word meaning circle = universe with interior squares Four points of compass; basis for Indian stupa

Many more design and pattern application exist. The bases for pattern combination are found in symbols associated with gods and goddesses. A partial listing with variations on the symbols follows:

Pattern **Symbolism**

Lotus

A spiritual and psychic center (chakra) associated with the wheel, sun, cosmic womb, life, purity (grows from stagnant water but stands above it surrounded by filth) opens its 108 petals:

$12 \times 9 = 108 \qquad 1 + 8 = 9$

Nine becomes auspicious number: the number of Agni (fire) the square of nine forms the mandala of 81 squares and encloses the universe.
The lotus is one of eight lucky emblems on the sole of Buddha's foot. The lotus is pictured in association with many Hindu gods and goddesses:

Skanda, son of Shiva and Parvati holds lotus
Lakshmi/Padma is the lunar goddess associated with moisture, cows and wealth
As a dwelling place for divinities, Brahma was born from lotus
Agni, the fire god rises from a lotus
Surya and Vishnu are shown with lotus as solar gods

"India is like a lotus, it does not open all its petals at once, but reveals itself one petal at a time."

Sunithi Narayanan

Triangle

The symbol formed by the least number of lines for enclosing space; it is associated with gender:

= lingam, symbol of Shiva, Shakta

= yoni, feminine energy of Shiva, Shakti

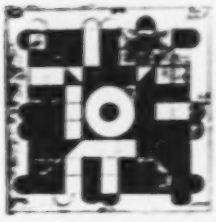
= symbol for shri yantra - the union of opposites

Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer are often considered to occupy a triangular configuration or trinity.

Circle

Along with the lotus, the circle is a seat for a diety. It is the visual metaphor for the structure of the universe perceived in the act of meditation. The symbol of Prakriti (Kali) if in flames. The Indian wheel is the national symbol to indicate the Dharma Chakra, the wheel of law in the Sarnath Lion Capital. In addition the wheel is associated with birth and re-birth (samsara) resulting in an accrued past (karma) to determine future existences. No man has the right to the empire of the earth unless he has Vishnu's chakra (disk) in his hand at birth or is born with the disk of the full moon shining on his forehead or on his chest (chakra/varti).

Square

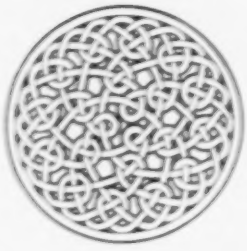


The square reveals a pattern of order in the universe, a standard of proportion the perfect measure for man. It is the basis of the temple or any sacred center; the square and the circle are both ornaments of the dharma, the order of things in the cosmos and the world of man. The square at the base of the stupa represents the world plane.

Swastika

"It is well" - associated with Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha (as god of crossroads) and Lakshmi; four points of the compass; dominated the whole Aryan world except Persia. Early association with the Sun (solar disc) and Dyaus the sky god, later Indra; four winds, four seasons, clockwise rotation of the earth, two bent sticks carried by Vedic Queen Arani to produce fire; fire god and divine carpenter Agni. Swastika is used as a seal on jars of holy water from the Ganges River. When shown on a Buddha, it is the symbol of the seal of his heart and of the round of existence. Buddha is the 9th incarnation of Vishnu.

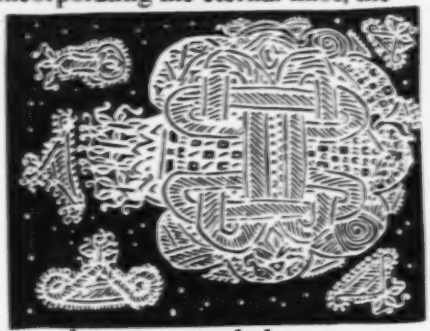
Eternal Knot



Often begins with a swastika. Originally the mystic knot on the breast of Vishnu depicts continuity, immortality, infinity. In Buddhism one of the eight lucky or auspicious signs; a symbol of longevity, or a stylized rendering of the bowels of Buddha or a vanquished enemy. The eternal knot may have been a design importation with the arrival of the Aryans to India (2000-1500 B.C.E.) The persistence of this pattern in the Aryan people of the North (Celts, Ibero-Celts, Hiberno-Saxon, Balts, Scandinavian) may suggest origins that are Aryan and continue through Roman to Islamic application in surface design.

There is no attempt in this study to show all of the design/pattern symbolism in India. This is rather prepared as an aid for teachers wishing to raise the awareness of their students to the interrelationship of the art and design of India.

The footprints of Lakshmi can take many forms--sometimes incorporating the eternal knot, the swastika, and other symbols or simply a dot and line design.

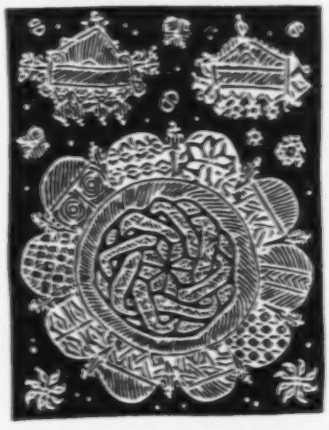


The meaning exceeds the symbolic interpretation. Lakshmi has as her many symbols a noose, a lotus (Padma and Kamala), money, elephants, as Devi she has wings, a conch shell, swastika. As the wife of Vishnu, Lakshmi accompanies him in all of his various avataras and she assumes the appropriate symbols in relation to the role she plays with him.

The feast for Lakshmi (vrata) is celebrated on the Friday preceding the full moon in the moon-month of Sravan (late August, when the sun enters Virgo). Married women take a bath, put on new clothes, and paint a mandala (ornamental circle) on the floor with a lotus in the center. The lotus is the symbol associated with Lakshmi thus the lotus and the scattering of grains reminds worshippers that she represents growth and charity.

The variety and interpretation of Indian surface pattern and design is infinite. It has many applications in mathematics as well as art. For the teacher the use of patterns can be woven into lessons using Indian mythology as the vehicle, mathematics to calculate the design, and art to complete the colors within the design. An example follows:

> *In Kerala there was a king by the name of Mahabali who was so popular among his subjects that Vishnu in the form of his fifth incarnation, a dwarf called Vamana, became jealous. Vamana with the intention of crushing King Mahabali appeared to him one day as a Brahmin (sage) and begged for a little land--"as much as I can cover in three strides." The generous king agreed whereupon Vishnu resumed his form as a god, stepped over the earth in his first stride, across the universe in the second, and stopped at that point and left King Mahabali only the lower world, Patala. The people of Kerala were so outraged and hurt Vishnu had to make a concession. He agreed that Mahabali could return one day each year to visit them on earth.*
>
> *Thus for ten days prior to the arrival of King Mahabali there are* **Pookalam** *competitions in Kerala. These competitions are floor designs that are circular in design, mathematical in structure, and are filled with flower petals and seeds to form an appropriate landing site for the return of the King. This is the festival of Onam.*



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MAP OF INDIA